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SUBJECT: GRAND MOSQUE OPENS IN ASTANA, MADRASSA TO COME

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: On April 5, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs arranged a tour for diplomats of the new Grand Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center in Astana. Moderate Islam is a central part of traditional Kazakh culture, though years of Soviet influence had a secularizing influence on Kazakhstani society. The opening of the Grand Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center plays an important symbolic role in President Nazarbayev's vision for the new capital, Astana. Whether the Islamic Center will play an important spiritual and theological role remains to be seen. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. The impressive Islamic Center complex, located in the new administrative area in Astana, is the second major religious facility to open in Astana in the last year, following the opening of a new synagogue complex in September. President Nazarbayev, who takes pride in his role as a supporter of Kazakhstan's religious diversity, formally opened the center on March 22.

[1](#)3. In 1999, President Nazarbayev and the Emir of Qatar reached an agreement on construction of the Islamic Center. The project, which cost \$6.8 million, was funded by the Qatari government, designed by a Libyan architect and built by a Turkish company. A Kazakh artist designed the interior of the mosque, incorporating a blend of Islamic holy inscriptions and traditional Kazakh motifs. The new mosque is the biggest in Kazakhstan, built to accommodate up to 5,000 worshippers at a time.

[1](#)4. In addition to the mosque, the Islamic Center complex will have a madrassa (currently under construction), which will be the first full-fledged school for imams in Kazakhstan. The chief mufti of Kazakhstan, based in Almaty, will select the faculty from among locally and internationally renowned teachers of Islam. According to the GOK in Astana, the Islamic Institute in Almaty is the only registered institution that provides religious education, though it is not set up to provide full clerical training. (Note: Post knows of several officially registered madrassas in Southern Kazakhstan, although these do not provide clerical training. There are also numerous unofficial madrassas throughout Kazakhstan. Since these are not registered, it is difficult to gauge the content of the education and the extent to which any alumni are practicing as clerics. End note.) According to the head imam of the Astana Grand Mosque, most imams currently practicing in Kazakhstan were trained outside Kazakhstan, in Uzbekistan, Turkey, the Gulf states and other Arab countries.

[1](#)5. Counterterrorism and human rights observers have noted the need for moderate options for Islamic religious education in Kazakhstan to counterbalance underground madrassas and nonclerical institutes that preach a more extreme version of Muslim doctrine and that may have connections to international terrorist organizations. In March 2004, Southern Kazakhstan Humanitarian Academy was shut down by the Ministry of Education and Science when the GOK discovered that the school, which offered nonclerical religious education, had been founded by the Society of Social Reforms of Kuwait (Jamyat al-Islakh al-Ijtimayi), an organization considered by the USG and GOK to have ties to terrorism. At that time, the Ministry ruled that the students of the academy should be transferred to other institutions to let them to complete their education.

[1](#)6. COMMENT: President Nazarbayev's ambitions for his capital city, Astana, are being largely fulfilled, and the new Grand Mosque fits well into those plans. The placement of the mosque at the crossroads leading to the new government center assures its visual prominence in the new skyline. There are few opportunities for formal religious education within Kazakhstan, forcing those who wish to study theology to go abroad; they often bring home a more extreme view of Islam than has traditionally been practiced in Kazakhstan. The opening of a madrassa in the capital thus provides a welcome opportunity for developing an indigenous Muslim clergy that reflects Kazakhstan's traditions of interreligious cooperation. The involvement of the GOK-appointed chief mufti in the selection of faculty suggests that the GOK will keep a close eye on the Astana madrassa in order to ensure that it adheres to this tradition. Post will continue to encourage the GOK to reach out to

unregistered madrassas and cooperate with them to bring them into compliance with the registration laws and to expand the options for clerical education within Kazakhstan. END COMMENT

17. Dushanbe minimize considered.

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